

Interview with
Amilkar Velez-Lopez
Transcription and Research

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer: Linda Arroyo

Interviewee: Amilkar Velez-Lopez

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Place: 208 Bloomfield Ave. Newark, NJ 07104 (Office)

Mr. Velez Lopez: Hello, my name is Amilkar^{velez-}Lopez. I'm a Puerto Rican born in Adjuntas sometimes we say Adjuntas but it's Adjuntas. Actually I was born in Lares but I was raised in Adjuntas. Uh.. I lived in Adjuntas up to the age of eight or so then I lived in San Juan up to the age of thirteen then went to New York, I lived there up to the age of eighteen, then I returned to Puerto Rico and I studied at Inter-American University and I was there for four years. Got a B.A. in social work; Bachelor of Arts, actually, Cum Laude. Then I returned to New York in 1968, I came to New Jersey, to Newark, and I started working at Aspira and after that I went to law school, Seton Hall Law School and I graduated, I studied part-time, part-time at night, graduated in 1970 and I've been in practice since 1980.

Linda Arroyo: OK, How old were you when you left Puerto Rico?

Mr. Velez-Lopez: Uh.. First time, in my first trip when I left Puerto Rico I was around thirteen or so second time I was around twenty or so.

Linda Arroyo: The first time, did you come with your family?

Mr. Velez-Lopez: Both occasions Uh.. we came together.

Linda Arroyo: Why did you come from Puerto Rico?

Mr. Velez-Lopez: Why did I return to Puerto Rico?

Linda Arroyo: No. Why did your family come when you were thirteen?

Mr. Velez-Lopez: OK, Uh.., well like the rest of the migration looking for better uh.. job opportunities and the labor very hard in factories and then Uh.. I went to school and the time came that I was , I finished high school I joined Aspira. I am an original aspirante and through Aspira and through my parents I Uh.. decided to go to Inter-American University in Puerto Rico and thats how come we returned to Puerto Rico and when I finished college in Puerto Rico; Again for the same reason we returned looking for better opportunities over here, educationally and Uh.. employment wise.

Linda Arroyo: OK, Um.., when you came here after you got your bachelors degree what made decide to go for your Masters?

Mr. Velez-Lopez: Well eh.. I had studied social work in Puerto Rico eh.. at the, what is actually; what its called is a social work concentration and with that education a B.A. was not enough to get a good-paying job and also there was at that time the Vietnam war, era, and I really was not interested in going to Vietnam and if you were furthering your education you could get^{an} exempt^{on} and Uh.. that was another reason.

Linda Arroyo: Why did you go into law, after getting your masters?

MVL: Well, I practiced social work for a few years I believe; about ten years altogether Uh.. and around my fifth year or so I realized that social work, uh.. through social work I could only effect so much change. I'm involved, I like a lot of community involvement and as a social worker it was basically a one to one kind of process and social work unfortunately is a kind of a powerless position and the field of law is a very powerful position and I felt that through law my opportunities to be of change to others would be more effective.

LA: OK, Um..,going back to when you came from Puerto Rico,Where did you first *Ego?* and what was your initial reaction to the United States?

MVL: First time?

LA: Yeah.

MVL: I came to Manhattan to the area of near 135th street between Broadway and Amsterdam and that those were all apartment buildings and usually 20, 30, 50 apartments per building and it was my first time. Living in Puerto Rico I first lived in the countryside and then I lived in the urbanization "urbanizacion" which it was a one family house and uh.. at that time eh.. the neighborhood was still pretty well nicely kept to a large degree. And there was gang activity going around but it really did not affect me. I did not participate in that and I did not bother with those people. I was not into that kind of a crowd. But I remember that one time I did return to Puerto Rico and about 2 years or so after that and when I returned to New York; after having spent the summer in Puerto Rico. As I entered 125th Street in Manhattan, I really felt that dreariness, the darkness, the filth. It really was the first time that it kind of shocked me up to that point you had kind of just blended in and then when I went to Puerto Rico and spent the summer over there and came back it kind of hit me. So after that for two days I did not come out of my house. (Laughter)

LA: OK, Um... Did you experience any discrimination?

MVL: Oh Yes. I have experienced that as a student, I have experienced that as a social worker, I have experienced that in my legal profession and I have experienced that in my private life both as a young man and now as a middle, beginning middle aged man. (interruption)

LA: OK, Um... We were talking about discrimination right?

MVL: Right.

LA: Can you tell us some things about... some stories?

MVL: Well when I was back in high school, I wanted to be, I went to George Washington High School in Manhattan in the upper part of Manahattan. Uh.. I wanted to be in the academic program but my nice friendly guidance counselor uh.. recommended that I be in the general program. The general program was really like a worthless piece of paper nevertheless we battled with them and I was placed in the academic program. And when I was in high school I kind of took it a little bit easy, I didn't really study as hard and nevertheless, I graduated and I went to college in Puerto Rico as I indicated before, Inter-American University. I graduated Cum Laude from there. And I, when I graduated from there I really felt like going back to this lady and showing her, you know, that it could have been done and that it was done and the same way that they had attempted to deny me of a educational opportunity. In fact they were still doing

it and they continue to do that till this day. That was at that level. Uh.. at other levels I found that Um.. in when I was looking for a job as an attorney when I graduated from law school I sent out numerous resumes to different companies, different law firms Uh.. not one responded. So I decided to settle my own office and I thank them in a way for that and you know I'm happy what I'm doing, I'm comfortable. In my private life I moved to a town called Cranford, New Jersey, back with my family after I was married and my children. That was about four or five years ago and we basically had to move out. And I mean had to move out because of the harassment that my children were getting from other students in school to the point that I had to file uh.. quite a set of criminal charges against a set of parents over there who had twins that were basically in one occasion had attacked physically my son you know with fists and I also had file a complaint with the civil rights division. Uh.. So that you know we have found that across and sometimes you know like my wife when she was in that town in Cranford she would walk into the library looking for our children and the little "Americanitos" would begin to sing La cucaracha, La cucaracha... that's the kind of experience that we have had. Also, in the courts sometimes you see the smirks and the court attendants Um.. and especially.. The judges I have no qualms with. There's been a few but by and large judges have been very Um helpful especially one that I'm thinking now of Judge Rod who's quite a gentleman. Sometimes, you know, they really make you feel welcome when you go to the court. And sometimes you feel, could, feel the the coldness the indirectory. [sic]

LA: Um, Generally, has your ethnic origin, I mean do you believe that your ethnic origin as a Puerto Rican, helped or hindered you here?

MVL: It has helped me in occasions and hurt me in occasions. Um.. One of the reasons why I assumed I was accepted at Columbia University. I had good grades yes, but I think the fact that I was a Puerto Rican also helped me. Uh.. When I was accepted at Seton Hall University Um.. I also when I graduated from Columbia I graduated, I didn't graduate with honors I came close to that but, I had a high average I think it was like 3.46 or something like that. Uh.. I believe that the fact that I was a Puerto Rican also helped me in the process to be admitted to Seton Hall University. At that time I also utilized the services of both Aspira and what is called the Puerto Rican Legal Education Fund, they were instrumental in helping me, pointing out ways to prepare myself in order to apply for the LSAT and to apply the procedures, and applying to the law school itself.

LA: OK, Um.. I hear that you told me that you went to New York. When did you come to New Jersey? At what age?

MVL: I first moved to New Jersey back in 1968 when I came directly from Puerto Rico. My parents had already Uh.. my father had come ahead and had an apartment ready and then when I finished school in Puerto Rico we moved to Paterson, New Jersey and then from there I started. I used to travel to New York, to Columbia and also stayed at my aunt's house in the Bronx. Uh.. When I was in Paterson I was instrumental in developing something called the Puerto Rican Coalition for Progress. There were a group of us which we formed an organization to provide services to the community. I also became involved in the political scene over there and became involved with Casa program and different things in town over there. Then I, that was in from around 1968 to 1970 or so. Then I got married in 1970 and I settled over here in Newark. Dr. Hilda Hidalgo was a friend of ours because at that time I was working at Aspira. When I graduated from Seton, from Columbia University I began to work over here in Aspira of New Jersey in 1980 and I met Dr. Hidalgo, Hilda Hidalgo and she helped us get an apartment and Uh.. then I became involved over here. I've been involved with Aspira with Cura which is a drug rehabilitation program which we founded back in

1970, with Casa de Don Pedro Uh.. which we also founded, with Focus, Uh.. with Newark Borinquen Lions Club and different other activities. I ran as a delegate for Ted Kennedy back in 1980 to the democratic convention. And I went to the convention in New York. Invo .ed over here in my house I've had the governor of Puerto Rico visit us, the son of Jimmy Carter Um.. different other personalities in town, and in the office they have come.

LA: Can you tell me a little bit more about your political views?

MVL: Ok, Um.. basically I'm a registered Democrat in New Jersey, I have been involved with a democratrice party to some extent. At this point I am quite disillusioned with it. They, like the Republicans take us for granted. They use us and abuse us and then they make the deals as if nothing. And I believe that in the last couple of elections more Puerto Ricans and hispanics have voted with Reagan and the Republicans not because they necessarily believe what their saying but as a vote against the Democrats which up to this moment continue to ignore us. And I think the evidence of that goes, is, was well established in 19.. first time that Um Tom Keane, present governor ran against Jim Florio. Jim Florio thought that he had it made and I personally have contacted some of his people here in Newark. At one time I even had Channel 41 I believe it was or 47, one of those TV stations ready in my office to interview the man who had agreed to come and never did show up. They felt that they didn't need the hispanic vote and at the same, in that eletion a friend of mine, Manny García, ran for the assembly in Hoboken. And Hoboken is a very,very Democrat town, and he ran in the Republican party. He obtained, I believe, some in word around three or ten thousand votes. I really don't remember. It was, the votes that he got over there was the most votes that any Republican had received in that area there from what I understand and Jim Florio lost by about a thousand votes. And to this day I still say that, that small change over there was what caused Jim Florio to lose which I was very happy for.

LA: Do you ever think of running for political office?

MVL: I have been asked to run for counselman and assemblyman. I think I'd enjoy that and in the future there is a possibility that I may do that.

LA: Ok, Um.., Going to your social organizations, you spoke about Aspira and CURA, What do you think is the purpose of Aspira?

MVL: Aspira, is at this point a nationwide,although in some respect but in fact, limited to about I believe 5 or 6 states at this point and Puerto Rico, Organization, which is devoted to leadership development, Um.. increasing the educational opportunities of Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics we do not discriminate against other Hispanics. Um.. and just general uh.. sensitizing of the educational structure to recognize that Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics need to be given opportunities to further their education. Our community is basically a poor community and we have to depend often on grants or scholarships in order to proceed with our higher education. Uh.. Aspira was instrumental in doing that, and Uh I believe in the Aspira process. I've gone through Aspira process from an aspirante, I helped to found the what is called the Borinquen Aspira Society. That was the first time... we had a mess over that they didn't want us to call it the Borinquen Aspira Society, it was supposed to have been called the Borinquen Aspira Club but that is back in George Washington High School in 1963 or 64. Then from that I went with Aspira in the first leadership development trip. We met the governor and all the imortant people over there. Uh.. we uh.. I also participated as a staff member as I indicated before when I was a program director over here in Newark.

Participated at the board level I was a member of the board directors of Aspira of New Jersey. I participated as a club advisor. I was a club advisor of Aspira at the Eastside High School club over here in Newark, New Jersey. So I've been in all four levels of Aspira.

LA: Are you still active in Aspira?

MVL: I really don't have the time anymore but I still support it in any way I can. My daughter has already begun to go to some of the meetings and I am very proud of the association of Aspira. And I encourage our community to continue to support it.

LA: OK, Can you tell us a little bit about the purpose of CURA?

MVL: CURA is an organization that we developed back in 1970 because at that time there was a very large heroin problem within our community. There was a lot of Puerto Rican kids were dying of heroin overdoses and just general drug abuse. It has past turn somewhat after the Hogar Crea in Puerto Rico is a.. we are a therapeutic community which does not use any other drugs to try to overcome the problem. We don't believe in methadone maintenance or anything like that. We believe in counseling and therapy to help ~~the~~ the woman or man to get rid of his drug addiction. At this point we have programs for men and women Uh.. we have programs also to help the alcoholic become rehabilitated and we have the educational preventive component which we have people that go out to talk to the kids in high schools and other places to awaken them to the problems of cocaine, crack, heroin you name it, to try to help them to understand what that can do. It is a highly respected program, people from the United Nations have visited it. We've been recognized nationally as one of the best. We started with one desk and one office back in 1970-71 I really don't remember exactly. At this point we own three buildings and other properties and we have been able to provide services to thousands of people. We have an inpatient program which is, the person stays there, live there 24 hours a day for a period of time usually nine months to a year. (cough) We have the outpatient program for people who are able to maintain their work and just come for counseling.

LA: Is CURA here in Newark only?

MVL: It's located at 75 Lincoln Park in Newark, telephone number 622-3570.

LA: What is your role in this organization?

MVL: Well, I was one of the founding members, there were about six of us, Ramon Rivera, Genové Vesona, Luis Mike Rodriguez, Uh I don't remember some of the other people. And I was president of the board of directors for about 2 or 3 years. At this point I had resigned from the board because of my load over here. But I still provide legal services to them.

LA: So that means you're active?

MVL: Yes, to that degree yes.

LA: OK..

MVL: I still consider myself part of them.

LA: I'm aware that you did some field observation at the parole board and some field placement in New York with the Bureau of Child Welfare and Child Guidance. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

MVL: Ok, the parole board was in Puerto Rico, that was when I was doing my social work concentration. Uh.. at that time we would go I think it was once or twice a week and we would interview people who've been considered for parole. Parole, as you know, is that process ~~in~~ which occurs after he has been arrested and is incarcerated and they want to release him. That is called parole. Uh.. in Puerto Rico we interview the family, we would go interview relatives of the victims to see because sometimes it would not be safe for the person to come out. Maybe some brother, father, or uncle waiting for the guy to come out just to finish him off. So we would have to make a full study to determine if it was safe for this person to return to that area or not, and whether he had rehabilitated himself to the degree to be permitted to come out. One with the Child Guidance department in New York was we were stationed at an elementary school and we would be doing the job of the social worker which was to interview and recommend for a particular education program was better suited. Or if a particular family had particular problems be they medical, social whatever trying to find the necessary sources for them, guide them Uh.. help them locate resources to deal with whatever they were facing.

LA: And the Child Guidance?

MVL: The child Guidance was similar to that except that we were stationed sort of like a welfare office, which the purpose of that was to make sure that the parents who were receiving moneys were in fact utilizing the money to help the children that they were supposed to be helping and not taking the money and smoking or drinking. There were occasions when I would visit a family and the mother would be drunk on the bed and I really could not interview much. We would have to indicate to our superiors what was happening. At that point we were students so we really could not take much action except recommend action to the supervisors.

LA: Did you ever get personally involved in any of these cases?

MVL: Well, Uh.. you try not to because you are supposed to be an objective person. Uh.. But all of us who are in this field have to realize that we are not machines. This does affect us and I remember there were a couple of kids, you know, I would try to make friends with and they would give me their pictures you know, I would be very happy and after a while. And then it became difficult because you would have to be parting and you would hope that whoever came after you could also continue in the same thing trying to help them out?

LA: Did you ever think of continuing doing that kind of work?

MVL: Well, one of the reasons I stopped doing that is because it was very limited, you know. It was a one-to-one which is very necessary. I'm not knocking it, I mean in the field of social work you have basically three areas. You have what is called group work, individual case work, and you have community organization, and you really need those three things. ~~There's~~ There's no problem that can be dealt with just one approach. If it is hunger you need to help that individual eh.. eat; but at the same time you gotta maybe organize them to produce some of the food and if you have a community organization person maybe organize the whole neighborhood to do something about it you know change action over there. You know, if people are selling drugs get together to stop the selling of the drugs. Uh.. helping at different levels. I was involved in casework basically and I felt that it really was very limited and kind of a powerless position as I indicated before. Over here, if there is a problem, you know, like we have done through there have been law suits brought against the United Community Corporation, another organization in the town to come to

remedy some of the problems and sometimes one order from one judge can affect a thousand people or million people and things like that.

LA: Do you belong to any religious organizations?

MVL: Yes, I'm a catholic. I'm involved involved with the Uh.. cursillistas, which is a movement within the church. We have religious retreats. Uh.. a true cursillista does one cursillo, which is the original one and then we do cursillos de renovacion which is sort of like a refresher and warm-up kind of a course. I was involved with Father Posada in the dinamicas. The dinamicas basically to help the families stay together or deal with problems, you know. Sometimes people who are thinking of divorce come to me and I kind of shock them because first I tell them "Look I'm going to tell you two things" I say "Look you come over here to find you legal rights are and I will give you that information but before doing that I'm going to tell you this other thing" and there have been couple of people coming over here looking for divorces have ended up going to dinamica you know and been helped. Unfortunately, sometimes they go to dinamica and still the process has to continue and they do get divorced, but at least we give them a second opportunity. I'm also involved with something called Sanación which is sometimes a well to some people it might come as shock to believe in what I called sort of like faith healing. But if you see what are some of the things that happen when people get together and pray and believe they can be cured. Uh.. if you were to put in terms of scientific terms would be like psychosomatic kind of a response. The mind controlling the body to the point that people who have had cancer, it has disappeared and this is diagnosed by doctors. I mean it's not that we think it's there but people have had cancer, the cancer has disappeared. People who have had problems with their backs have disappeared. People who were paralyzed, walking. People with other kinds of problems just been feeling better or actually disappearing and as far as we understand there is one fellow who had Aids who was cured. And as you probably know Aids is considered an incurable disease. But this fellow which I personally know of has at this point from my last conversation gained about 20 or 30 pounds after he was basically on his death bed and when we first met him he had the psychoma, you know, the all the spots on the skin of, cancer on the skin and he was a homosexual and he you know he Uh.. recognized that that was not helping him and he asked for forgiveness and law and behold and he is well..

LA: These people who get cured do they belong to different religions or..?

MVL: Yes, they don't have to be catholic, just as to go to the dinamicas you don't have to be catholic, but to be a cursillista you have to be catholic.

LA: I'm curious, Does the catholic religion go against this at all?

MVL: Against what?

LA: Against this faith-healing, do they believe in that?

MVL: Uh.. it appears, it appears in the Bible. It appears as as a gift. It's one of the gifts the Bible talks about. That people have the gift of talking that people have the gift of music, that people have the gift of writing, that people who have the gift of art. You know not everybody can be a Michaelangelo, Michelangelo "Como se llama este tipo?" Miguelangel. Este, not everyone can be a Picasso but and not everyone can do what a fellow has sort of direct this whose name is Michael Polak. who is a Cuban gentleman of Polish ancestry uh.. can do.

At this point, I understand the Vatican is studying this case.

LA: Uh.. Where do these things occur, in a church or...?

MVL: We have a, we meet at San Augustine Church over here in Newark, NJ located at Sussex Ave and James Street near Norfolk Ave. Yes, I think I have to stop now.

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LA: The last time we were talking, you spoke a little bit about faith-healing. Have you been through it yourself?

MVL: Yes I've been through it Uh.. I've participated once. Uh.. my involvement though has basically been limited mainly with other people. Helping other people. I don't know if I last time I spoke indicated that what we do within the team is that we have one person who prays who is Mike Polak. Then there are other people who also help pray but he's the one who has the gift. Then there is a group of us who catch the people as they receive and has basically been my role. To catch the people so that they don't hurt themselves. People go in sort of a transe Uh.. when they receive it sometimes it's sort of like a thinkig kind of a feeling to some people would appear to be. Uh.. the person may be out for a minute, may be out for an hour, may be out for longer, may be out for ten minutes. We catch them so that, since they have no control when they fall they don't get hurt. And sometimes we may have one person, we may have 20 persons on the floor, we may have 40 persons on the floor. There have been times when we have assisted people where there have been crowds of 700 people or more and of those more than half have, we have been able to help. And I have seen with my own eyes that people that have different illnesses and different problems have been helped.

LA: How is that? Do people go up to the altar?

MVL: Well, there are different ways, usually the evening begins by my wife and other people going around the audience and asking them if they want to be prayed upon or to have somebody pray for them, on behalf of them. Then those who say yes we inform them what they have to do which is usually either to stand on line or stay in the seats until such time we tell them to come up. Mike is usually up in the front and people go there and as people start falling then we have to move the group and so we go basically down the isle then make a right or left turn and then come back. Sort of like in circles you know we make a couple of trips sometimes the persons come up to the front. But By and large the group goes to the people.

LA: Do you have to be really sick to get this..?

MVL: Not necessarily. We assist anyone who wishes help. The main concern is for the religious aspect of it, not so much for the physical aspect of it. Uh.. we the person, help the person recognize that they maybe leading a life that need some ~~cor~~rectification and in so doing that's the first step. Once the person recognizes that they are something to themselves the drug abuse, the alcoholism, some of the actions that they are doing which affect their spiritual life then that person once recognizes that that is the first step in the healing process. Then comes the physical aspect of it. Persons who truly recognizes that they have to change then often ends up receiving physical healing of any problems that they may have. It is part of what some people have

got to see in order to believe. And that is related, all that is related to that process.

LA: Can you speak about, talk about people who have done probably something wrong in their life. How about people who are just ordinarily good and they just have some either a heart problem or something big. Can they be healed also?

MVL: Of course. Uh.. it is anyone who has any kind of a problem, ^{be} physical, be spiritual, goes there. It not just for the "BAD" sinners. We are all sinners to some degree. But anyone who needs help can go there. We are in the process now of changing the format because we found that the, it would be very draining upon ~~the~~ Mike Polak and upon the team members to go through 3 or 400 people at night. So now we are going to be changing that (interruption)... So we're changing the format so that when we have a group of people say 4 or 500 people by and large those who need some help will be dealt with on a group basis and those who really need more intense help those are the ones that we would deal with as the team through an individual basis.

LA: Do you think that your Christian life had anything to do with your success?

MVL: Oh Yes definitely so. Uh.. I would say I try to be good to God so because I know God has been good to me. That may sound corny and probably some of the people that know me hearing that for the first time would say where is this guy coming from. But the ~~reality is, the~~ reality is that when you lead a good life it makes you feel better and I believe there's some reward both over here and the ^{next} after.

LA: So Uh.. What part has religion or God played in your personal as well as your business life?

MVL: An important part. There was a point there in which it was not playing that much in the sense that I was not participating in the spiritual aspect of the church. In other words, the catholic church. Uh.. but I would say about 7 or 8 years ago I met a man by the name of Antonio Pérez known as Tony Perez who was a business man over here. He was a business man, successful, and who was also a very religious man, who introduced me to uh.. the church, to the cursillos, and ^{at} first I resisted the idea and then I did go to the cursillo. I don't know if I already explained what a cursillo was before. OK, A cursillo is a religious weekend in which deals basically with the relationship between you and God and what it does is, it teaches you to face up to those things you have done which may have hurt you, your family if you are married or your parents if you are not married and which helped me realize the good things that I have which probably I was taking for granted, and to realize that there were certain things that I was doing that probably were hurting my wife and other people and not necessarily very evil but I mean just things that really had no business being done. And based on that, you know, I decided to change and ever since then things have been much better for my family and myself. I feel much happier, more relaxed and I'm really enjoying what I am doing. I have, After that doing the cursillo which you only do once in your life "Cursillo de Cristiandad" and that I really don't want to expalin too much what really goes in there because I prefer for a person who is interested in that to experience it. It's like many other thing in life, you know. It's like Uh you can explain how to kiss a woman, you can use all kinds of words but until you kiss a woman you really don't understand what you're talking about too well. Um.. and in other words to that, you know, you really have to feel ~~the~~ and experience it. After that I

have done cursillos de renovacion which is sort of like to renew (knock-interruption) So the cursillos de renovacion uh.. it intensifies that process and it's also a very beautiful experience and again it's a retreat that you go away. There's a group of men or a group of women and during that time you do not have any contact basically with the outside world in case of an emergency only. And it's again like I said a really terrific experience that you have to go through it. It can not be explained.

LA: I know my family members all have gone through it. One question though I tried to talk to people about the cursillo in English to American people but they don't know what I'm talking about. They never heard of it. Is this just in Spanish?

MVL: It is basically all Spanish. There is a the house that is now used which is in Kearny. Also a group of American people who are going there. I eh.. they use some of the songs that we have in Spanish translated to English.

LA: Lets reflect a little bit on what we spoke about last time. When you came from Puerto Rico, did you come with any relatives outside your parents?

MVL: Well, we came to live with my... what happened was back in 1959 my grandfather went to Puerto Rico to visit and he was staying there and he died over there. And then when uh.. first uh.. when we returned.. when we came here, we came to live by my grandmother's home which was also the home of my aunt. So they had an apartment and that is where we stayed. I would say for maybe a year or so. My parents got jobs. They were working in factories, then we got our own apartment and then which was on Amsterdam Ave. and 133rd Street. And then we moved, 3 years later we moved over to the same building where my grandmother and my aunt were living on the first floor. They used to live on the 2nd floor 518 West 135th Street. When I came I first went to Junior High School 43 in Manhattan, which is located 129th Street in Manhattan and during the time I was there I developed a kidney infection which I ended up at Presbyterian Hospital on 168th Street and I was there for about 40 days hospitalized and I finished the eighth grade. I came over here, I was in the eighth grade, I finished the eighth grade over there at home. In the hospital and at home. I had a home tutor. Then I went back to Junior High School 43 to the 9th grade and luckily I did well and I was given a small award called the Hellen Keller Achievement Award. It was a little medal made out some very inexpensive metal but that little medal which I still conserve til this day was given to me because basically I overcame the handicap of the language and I was able, at that time they didn't have bilingual education or nothing like that. I was able to graduate with good grades and that little medal has been an inspiration to me basically through my life up to this point. I don't know if you know the story of Hellen Keller who was a blind woman etc. learned and overcame her obstacles. And I used that as a model that I myself have overcome obstacles and I would urge the community, Puerto Rican community, youngsters, you know teenagers, and college students to use her as a model. She overcame such tremendous obstacles. We certainly can overcome the ones that are put in our way. There are many obstacles that are placed in our education, in our social life, in our professional careers, that if we just sit back and and give up, we will never really achieve the potential that our community can achieve.

LA: So you didn't know English ~~when~~ when you came here?

MVL: No

LA: Was it difficult to learn?

MVL: It took me I would say about a year or less. Uh.. I remember one time I had

a teacher at the very beginning teaching me the different kitchen utensils. She said knife - I said knife, She said spoon - I said spoon, She said the other one and I got in trouble because I didn't ... (laughter) So other than that I managed to survive. Then from there I went to George Washington High School in Manhattan, upper Manhattan and I think as I already indicated before I had interesting experiences there with the racism. But we survived that one. I was involved with the student government there even though it was just to be over there. But I had a good professor, good teacher Mr. Ruben who was a Jewish gentleman. He was a wonderful man and he encouraged me in that respect and I participated and as I indicated before also I found to be unaware of the people. An Aspira club over there and I was active in the Spanish Club, and different other activities and the student government, and that helped me. It helped me to make friends and to learn and participate.

LA: Was that here in New Jersey?

MVL: That was in New York, George Washington High School in Manhattan on 181st street and Alderman Ave. I think it is.

LA: When you found the Aspira club did, were you already involved in it here in New Jersey. Did you ever hear of it?

MVL: No. Aspira began in 1963 or thereabouts. We started our club in 1964. We were one of the first ones. I was, I am an original aspirante or close to. If not from the very first group then from around the second group. And at any rate we did go to P.R. with the first Aspira leadership trip and that was in 1964. So I've been with Aspira as I indicated before at all levels. I wish more people would become more involved and not forget what Aspira has done for the community and for the students. There are students that I've helped do come back and help Aspira directly or indirectly but definitely not forget about it and to remember that there are others following in our footsteps who also need help.

LA: You spoke about your grandparents living here. How was your life in Puerto Rico before you came here?

MVL: Well I grew up in the countryside, I grew up climbing on the trees of my neighbors. They had a nice mandarine, tangerine, mandarina? como se dice? tangerine tree. But they don't want their tangerines to be picked from the tree and making sure that she was not watching. But my father was a business man, and I really thought I was a rich person when I was a kid in Puerto Rico because my father had a business there, own trucking business and he used to buy uh.. vegetables and bananas and things like that in the countryside and chickens and go to the market and sell them. Then my mother was a housewife and I used to have housekeepers who would take care of me and I went to school in small one one two classroom, uh one two classroom school called Paso Hondo in Adjuntas. From there I'm an only child and I grew up over there till I was I believe around 11 or so. and Uh.. I had cousins to play with and I had chickens and I had, I had a cow, I had a horse and all those things and I used to travel from Adjuntas to San Germán to where my mother is from for the holidays and I always remember going to the Easter Procession, "Viernes Santo" uh.. in San Germán and from there I, we moved to Puerto Nuevo which is in San Juan in the metropolitan area in Puerto Rico. Over there I went to a couple of schools. I was there for about two years or so.

LA: Did your father still have the trucking business?

MVL: He continued the same business, unfortunately he decided to change business. At that time the dump trucks were becoming more common in P.R. And he decided he, he always used to have Ford brand trucks, and he decided to change to the brand Studebaker. You probably don't know about it because they don't exist anymore. One of the reasons they don't exist anymore is because they were so lousy and he switched from one decent which was the one I indicated before and he bought two new dump trucks. He was driving one himself and he had a brother, he had a brother driving the other one. And they just started breaking up. You know, I mean one day he was driving the road, down the road and suddenly he sees a set of wheels go passing, and says "wait, those are familiar" it came out of his truck and just passed him. The truck almost turned over. And they basically led to almost bankruptcy for him, so what he did is he sold the truck. The trucks which were lousy and returned to his old profession and that's around the time we moved to Puerto Nuevo. And then, as I indicated before, when my grandfather died then we decided to give it a try over here. We came to N.Y. and that's where we lived until 1964.

LA: Did your parents ever learn English?

MVL: Oh yes, they speak English, they manage quite well. They are very intelligent people Uh.. if my father would have had the opportunity to go college I'm sure he would have been a heck of a professional. Even though he only has a high school education I remember myself one time when the principal of school back in 1956 or something like that went to the house, to our house and asked my father to become a teacher and they would have paid for.. at that time they were called Normalistas and they would just with two years of college they would let you become a teacher even though he didn't have that they would have paid for him to go to college but he didn't want to give up his business. My mother uh.. was taking computer back in 1959 training but when we came over here she did not continue with that.

LA: Why didn't your mother continue with that?

MVL: Well in the Puerto Rican families the "machismo" still works uh.. or at least it was working at that point quite well. And my father and the financial situation combined so my mother would have to work to help you know support the family. And she was not able to continue studying over here and besides at that point she was studying computers in P.R. and which was in Spanish of course, if she would have studied over here there was really nothing like we have now you know in term of training in Spanish which we do have now. But at that time in 1960's in N.Y. they didn't have any such programs.

LA: What kind of business did your father get into when he came?

MVL: Both of them worked in factories. Uh.. my father first worked with Elizabeth Arden, a company that manufactures perfumes. And he knew the lady and uh.. notice he met the lady at ~~at~~ work. He became the person who would take the new products from the developmental stage and take them over to her for her approval and what not. And he worked there for quite a few years and then he went to P.R. and they didn't want him to leave but uh.. then he did return and when he came back in 1968 to Patterson, N.J. he started working eh.. in a factory that made machinery. He became like a dyecutter and he really had to use a lot of math and what not and very precise measurements so that the machines would come out the right way or otherwise the machine would ~~have~~ become you know would come out very lopsided. And he was very proud of that and

I was very proud of what he did over there. And after he retired, ¹he retired about 3 or 4 years ago. Even after he retired they still would call him back to work over there because his work was so excellent. He was a very dedicated person, very knowledgable and he is, and he was working even though he had retired about 3 or 4 years after that.

LA: Are your parents still alive?

MVL: Yes they both still live in Patterson and they come over here 3 or 4 times a week. They spend with us different days and what not.

LA: Do they ever think of going back to Puerto Rico.

MVL: Oh my father is set on going back to P.R. but my mother is, my mother is not. My father if you let him go would take off tomorrow. And they both go to P.R. Uh.. once or twice a year. And my mother has traveled now to uh.. my mother likes to travel the other way. She goes to, been through Europe, she's been to Canada and she just came back from a trip to Italy, Israel and Spain. She ^{has} been to Germany, France and I believe England and Canada and she still wants to travel more.

LA: Good for her.

MVL: Yes, my father just thinks of P.R. doesn't think about even going to Santo Domingo. I've been trying to get him to go to Santo Domingo.

LA: Did he go with your mother to Europe?

MVL: No, he would not go. She has also been to Nevada and a couple of other states.

LA: When you first came here, did you come by plane or boat?

MVL: Uh, No, when we came, the first trip was back in 1959 that was in a plane that took eight hours from San Juan to New York. That was a constellation plane they had at that time. I remember they used to have four propeller engines. But then after that we just been in jets which just take about 3½ hours and 45 minutes thereabouts.

LA: That was your first time on a plane?

MVL: Yes.

LA: How did you feel?

MVL: It was interesting because at that time the navigation was good but it was not as good now. You would get what is called void so to speak or "basíos" and you would be traveling very nice and smooth and suddenly you would find yourself 50 feet or 100feet from the level you were just before. You know just like the bottom drops out of you and it was a long trip you know. Uh.. but you know I enjoy. I've been up to that I don't know 40 or 50 times. I really don't know how many times. We've been to Santo Domingo, Haiti, and other places so we get to travel a lot. But I still fear everytime I do come in myself.

LA: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

MVL: No at least not that I know of (laughter) no but not really. No I do not have any brothers or sisters.

LA: Do you remember any riots when you first came? As you know ^Puerto Ricans and ^RItalians did not get along too well.

MVL: Well Uh.. when I lived in N.Y. uh.. there was the time around the gang era in N.Y. and there were no riots but there would be gangs of kids of one ethnic group as opposed to gangs of kids of other ethnic groups. And you had to be careful where you walked. You even had to be careful how you dressed. I remember one time I had black pants and a yellow and an orange shirt and I went ~~to~~ somewhere up in the Bronx and suddenly I had to start running because those were the colors of the gang in the area. And no gang would tolerate somebody who was not a gang member having the colors of the gang. So those were things I learned at the beginning, you know, to be careful of how you dressed and where you went.

LA: How did you know what colors to wear?

MVL: Uh well, somebody comes over and lets you know "hey are you from such and such a gang?" and I would say no and well you know I better get going. We did not stay around to find out if it was appropriate enough to stay. We took the advise and left the area. But as to riots I Uh.. I been in the area where two of them had occurred. One was in Paterson, the other one was in Newark. I've always been as an adult, I have been involved in the community in many different activities and I remember the ^Puerto Rican riots of 1974 over here. And all right the word riot is not necessarily the proper word. Sometimes we have argued whether that was the proper word sometimes its rebellion and sometimes its just the frustration of the people coming out. Um.. and the one in Paterson which involved instances, the community just felt so abused and so neglected that they just had to explode. And uh.. as a result of the explosion in 1974 we ended up with a judge in the municipal court level.

LA: Were you ever near these riots? Did you see people actually fighting?

LA: The one in Paterson I was driving by on my way to my parents house and I did see people with ~~the~~ throwing stones and the shotguns out. We moved out of the area because I was with my family at that point. The one in Newark, I was in my parents house at that time when we overheard, when we heard on the radio what was happening. We have participated, I have participated with people that have negotiated after the riots to prevent further injury to our people because often times our own people get hurt more. Although there are some benefits that occurred out of that action. We try to as much as possible do it in a peaceful way. Uh.. and that's one of the reasons why I became a lawyer to try to get some changes implemented at a different level and become involved in the political parties an political process. But we're still finding that no matter how much we become involved and how much we as a community grow numerically and professionally etc. that the chances for our people here in Newark and Uh.. in other areas uh.. still have not improved tremendously. I believe if you were to consider how many ^Puerto Ricans there are in N.J. and how many Cubans Uh.. that the Cubans have been more effective than we have been, in taking advantage of the political opportunities. At this point there is a Cuban mayor in Union City, there is a Cuban senator, there is a Cuban superior court judge. There are no ^Puerto Rican assemblyman. I'm sorry, the same man who is mayor in Union City is also an assemblyman a Cuban fellow, Meléndez. There are no ^Puerto Rican assemblymen in N.J., there are no ^Puerto Rican mayors in N.J., there

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are no Puerto Rican superior court judges in N.J. Uh.. so if you take that as a measure, number-wise I think that the Cuban community has done been able to...)
(interruption)

The democratic party has really not responded to the needs of the Puerto Rican community and there is a movement among many Hispanics to get closer maybe to the Republicans, who themselves are not really responding truly our needs. But I believe that maybe in the future you will see more Hispanics voting for Republicans not necessarily because they believe in the philosophy, but because they give the opportunity to the Hispanics, whereas the democratic party has not been doing that.

LA: So basically you believe that the Puerto Ricans haven't accomplished as much as the Cubans?

MVL: The migrations are different. The Puerto Rican migration is basically a migration of working people, people who do not have that much formal education, who because of the status between P.R. and U.S. have the opportunity to return to P.R. at any moment. Whereas the Cuban migration more of a politicized migration, people who are escaping the gov't in Cuba and the opportunities for returning to Cuba are very limited. The descendants of the Cuban migration have been able to quite well combine in learning the language; the English language with the American political system and at the same time still retaining the Cubanness: the language, their food, their culture. And because they have been able to blend that quite well they are traditionally more conservative than the Puerto Rican community which tends to be a little more liberal in terms of the political thinking. But the Republican party has responded quite well to them and has given both financial support and has given them encouragement to go if nothing else at least in those areas where the opportunity for the republican party was not that great before. So they take areas such as certain areas such in Hudson where the Democrats have been controlling and instead of putting a regular American fellow or woman in to run in the Republican line they put a Cuban person to run against the Democrat and although the chances of winning is not that great, they been able to manage to win it. The republican party also did that with a Puerto Rican as I indicated before in Hoboken with Manny Garcia. So they also did it over here at one time with Miguel Sanabia in the 20.., in the Newark area, because they knew there was no chance of a regular republican person winning. But at least, as far as the Cuban community is concerned it has helped them in fact. Whereas with us we tend to make coalitions with blacks who often times do not respond to us once they are elected. It happened to us with Gibson. And to a large extent is happening to us with Sharpe James now. And it happened to us when I lived in Paterson we had differen coalitions and I believe some of the people that were involved with the Jackson campaign noticed that the same kind of pattern developing over there both over here in N.J. and also in N.Y.

LA: So do you think that the Puerto Ricans ~~too~~ haven't been progressing mostly because they have been following the wrong people, politically?

MVL: Well, that may be one factor. There are different factors. It isn't just one factor. You still have to think of the educational level of the community, which is still developing and the financial level and the lack of good leadership in our community are the "cangrejo" syndrome. You probably never heard of that because I just made it up. I tell you what "Cangrejo" syndrome is like this: you put a whole bunch of cangrejos a whole bunch of crabs in a box and in the process of trying to climb out they all bite each other and bring each other down. Consequently nobody really gets up because they are all trying to bite each other. Instead of helping each other out, then everybody wants to be the

over there and instead of helping each other out then everybody wants to be the cacique, everybody wants to be the chief. Nobody wants to be the indio, nobody wants to be the follower and personalities develop and whatnot, which has often resulted in people who are interested in just saying "Oh, the heck with this, I just don't have the time to be dealing with all this personality conflict" and many of us have often times you know experienced the situation where we want to become involved, we want to do more but because of the backbiting we just say you know "I have other things to do and I have to develop my practice over here or my business over there" or whatever it is the situation with the person. (interruption)... But as more people go to college and as more of our youth becomes more sophisticated in the process, I believe then that this situation will change.

LA: So, I'm a little confused, the Cubans have been here less ^{time} than the Puerto Ricans.

MVL: Oh Yes.

LA: And then now you think that they are...

MVL: Politically, wise they are ahead of us at this moment as of 1987.

LA: What do you think of the future?

MVL: Uh.. Well, as I said, the more that our people go to college and remain in college, graduate and return to ~~the~~ active in the community then our.. I believe our future would be better. But we cannot, the society is so complex, the political system is so so sophisticated, that somebody without a good college education cannot really grasp all the different things that have to be done. When to make a coalition, when to reject it, when to give in, when to demand, when to use this, when to use that. It really requires people to who have educational training as well as the leadership abilities which are inborn to really become an effective force within the community.

LA: In essence, are we really competing with the Cubans? There are other Spanish...

MVL: No, I don't really see our role as competing with the Cubans. I just used that as an example, you know that, that is one group that has made well. And just as they have made well uh.. if we go for it in using the mechanisms that they have used we can also do well. The educational process, unfortunately, the education that our children are getting is not as good as the other communities are getting. I don't want to get into a situation which is just Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Any urban area today is not really providing a good education to our children and consequently much of our kids, many of our kids who are going to college come out basically out of catholic school tradition. The people in the urban areas have to become more involved to try to make changes within the educational systems to get our students the proper education they need in order to compete with the rest of the society. The society has become a very technical and we have been left behind. uh.. We have to fight that, we have to develop our kids and Aspira is doing that at the high school level. But it's only so much that one agency can do. We really have to look at the totality of the state. Aspira is really just about in around 4 or 5 cities in NJ. But we really have to develop the people, the community, the parents, the leaderships, the organizations, the businesses. We you know, it amazes me how Puerto Rican businessmen will put in a thousand, a couple of thousand dollars to hire bosses, to get a parade of people to go and elect the president of the Puerto Rican Statewide parade. I mean, you should see the kind of mechanisms that go on there. The

to get a group of people to go and elect the president of the Puerto Rican statewide parade, I mean, you should see, the kind of mechanisms that go over there. The kind of money that is put into that kind of an effort. Whereas, if a Puerto Rican runs for an assemblyman over here in Newark or councilman, they would not put that kind of an effort to elect that person. It is amazing the kind of money that goes into the election of the Puerto Rican statewide parade, who is just a figurehead, who really has no power. Absolutely has no power in the state, as opposed to concentrating the financial resources, the energy, the psychic energies, the organization skills to get somebody elected.

LA: Do you think maybe we just don't believe in each other, we think other people would do better?

MVL: Well, you have to look at the history of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico has been colonized ~~since then~~ since Columbus got there to the present. P.R. was a colony of Spain and later was transferred to the U.S. Uh.. we have always been taught, you know, that the foreign is better; that the Spaniards were better, that the Americanos are better. That whatever is farther from it is basically better. It is a mistake that unfortunately ~~has~~ has filtered into the consciousness and unconsciousness of our community as a people. So you know there is definitely ~~that, that operating~~, that kind of mentality is operating our community and we and you have to do something to continue to fight that. That is so when you go to college, you try to be the best. First to show yourself that you can be the best and show others that you can be the best and that you will be the best. Uh.. as I indicated before I graduated Cum Laude from colleges competing with the other, you know with the regular "Gringos," regular Americanos and if one person can do it, not necessarily all would do it, because that is not the whole idea, but it's that you take it upon as a challenge upon yourself to improve, ~~upon yourself to~~ your family and others that it can be done. And once that has convinced, once you can say "Hey, I can do it" then you will do it. And as a community we have to say OK "we're going to elect a people to be councilmen, to be assemblymen, senators, mayors whatever the post may be, governor, and do it. At this point there are two basically hispanics people who have been elected governor in the U.S. In Florida and in New Mexico. Well, uh.. Miami has had a Puerto Rican mayor: Maurice Ferré and now has a Cuban mayor. The same way that Miami elected a Puerto Rican mayor and then elected a Cuban mayor, we can do it over here. We have to change the mentality, we have to change the system and if we, if it means voting for somebody that we hate just so that we could get ahead that's what it would be. Unfortunately, in our community we often end up voting for the guy that we like because "El se porto bien conmigo" and he was nice to me or whatever instead of looking at the issues of the person represented.

LA: Do you agree with the myth that they say Puerto Ricans come here just for welfare?

MVL: That, that story has been going around for how many years. Sure there must be some people who do that. But that is not what the majority of the migration is all about. When my parents came over here, they came to work. They went through difficult times but not for one moment did they accept any kind of public assistance. They, you know, I even had to argue with them to get them to make sure that they receive the social.. you know the benefits. They thought it was something like a handout. You know it's something that you pay for as you go in your life working for it. All communities benefit from welfare, the Cubans when they came over here had different programs just for the Cubans. The blacks, the Italians, the Germans, whoever, Irish etc. whoever in this country benefits from that system. Unfortunately, because of the failure of the educational system and often times the failure of our people in facing family

educational system and often times the failure of our people in facing family obligations, where sometimes it might be easier for the husband to take off because if he works making a hundred dollars a week, is going to be worse than if .. because if he leaves then his wife is going to be able to have uh.. medicaid, and foodstamps and regular income. The system sometimes helps to ~~operate~~ to break up the family. Which then, once that starts, all kinds of problems begin to develop from that: the drug addiction, the prostitution and other things. Our community needs to improve ~~upon~~ the educational system. That is the key to the whole thing. We need to get more people to involved in the financial, economic aspect of it. More people to become, where is bodega owners, doctors, lawyers, restaurant owners etc. all kinds of businesses and develop a solid financial basis to show ourselves that we can do it, which we are quite capable of doing it and show the world that we can do it.

LA: How do you think we could get all uh.. Puerto Rican people get all together to work together. How do you think we can do that?

MVL: It would probably require some sort of charismatic leader or various charismatic leaders to uh.. to become more involved in the community. At this point I don't see any. At least in the Newark area. I see a lot of people involved in the political process but not one charismatic kind of a leader such as you know Uh.. John Kennedy was in his era, or like Muñoz-Marín in his era, or like Pedro Albizu-Campos in his era or any person like that who can get the masses to respond. I don't know if we have one developing or not but it will require people like that or a group of people who have related kind of qualities to become uh.. the leaders and a spokesperson for the community. I did point out that not that many that I see.

LA: What are your political views in terms of the relationship between P.R. and U.S.?

MVL: Well Uh.. P.R. At this point is a commonwealth, which many people call it a perfumed colony. And ^{this} is basically a dependant relationship between P.R. and the U.S., basically geared to helping the U.S.. We, as a country, have also received benefits out of that. The situation as to whether P.R. should be independent or a commonwealth or a statehood, I think will eventually be between uh.. independence and so people call it an improved status of what they have now. If we ever became a state, we would lose our identity, our language, our culture. There is no question in my mind that would happen since that happened in Hawaii with the Hawaiians. Even Hawaii no longer have truly Hawaiians. And let me say that there are thousands of Puerto Ricans in Hawaii who are now Hawaiians who have never really, who have lost their identity of Puerto Ricanness; who migrated to Hawaii back in the early 1900's. But P.R. would have to, as a country, decide whether to become independent. And with the obligation and responsibility that that entails, the good and the bad or whether to stay as it stands now. As it stands now we are the wimps of the U.S., you know. We get whatever they want to hand us. We really cannot demand, we can request, we can ask but if we were to become independent then we could have to think about all kinds of political machinations in all sides. The U.S. pulling on one side, Russia pulling on another side. Other countries pulling on another side. What we would do to maintain an army, to maintain commerce with other countries. It is a very complicated question which ultimately must be resolved by two people: the Puerto Ricans in P.R. and the Puerto Ricans over here. We would have to have a say as much as the ones in P.R. because we were born there or we have relatives over there and it just cannot be decided by the people within P.R. If you look at the distribution of the Puerto Rican community you find that basically almost half of the Puerto Ricans are over here in the U.S. right now and the other half

is in P.R. So, it would require a plebiscite of the pathology of the Puerto Rican community.

LA: What do you want? Do ^{you} want it to stay as it is now, do you want it to become a state or...?

MVL: I definitely do not want it to become a state and I think at this point what is there is not what it should be. It has to be either improved or eventually independence.

LA: Do you have any family members in P.R.?

MVL: Uh.. uncles and cousins.

LA: Do you recommend that they should come here to the U.S. to make a life of their own or do you think P.R. now as it is now is good enough for them to study over there. What do you think?

MVL: Well the conditions in P.R. are ^{hor}rendous at this point in many respects. The crime rate is outrageous. The drug addiction is outrageous. The homosexuality is outrageous, the uh.. the financial situation you have in fact if the government admits to about a 20% unemployment rate, in fact it's about 40% unemployment rate. The unemployment rate is tremendous, yet you you drive through P.R. you see construction going on every day, you see basically all the people I know uh.. with 2 or 3 cars, 2 or 3 TV's, VCR's, collection of VCR tapes that I mean I think I bought my VCR last year, I think I owe 10 tapes they must have about 200 tapes. It's beyond belief what goes on and I really cannot explain except that I believe both the private debt in P.R. and the public debt in P.R. are almost the highest in the world. Credit is something that is used extensively in P.R. and but we still manage to survive. And it amazes me but the agriculture in P.R. is really going down the drain. We have. P.R. has come to a point that it has to import vegetables and produce from Santo Domingo to supply P.R. Whereas one time P.R. was able to supply other parts of the world. There are no more there are very few sugarcane plantations left in P.R. because most of them have been dismantled, sent to Latin America and other countries. The conditions in P.R. now as I see it are not good Uh.. for people to get jobs, although on the other hand the new avenues is opening up with new factories going in, but the factories go in with the exemption of taxes for ten years and the other ten years it either moves out or request to file under a new name for another ten years and there is a lot of cheating going on with that, a lot of exploitation with that. But uh.. you know the migration from P.R. continues. There's a lot of I would say to some degree there is some of migration, some drain of the philadenshy over there to here. But I, if I was to tell a relative of mine to come over here I would have to think hard before I could answer that. Definitely I do know that things in P.R. have to change, and if they don't change I fear what may happen.

LA: OK, I know your parents do, but do you believe the U.S. is the so-called "land of opportunity"?

MVL: Well, you have to be realistic, it is a land of opportunity. I personally believe that if I would have remained in P.R. I probably would not have been able to go to law school in P.R. I probably would not have been uh.. able to do some of the things I have done over here. Um.. It is a lot of opportunity for those who want to work at it and who understand would have to survive within the system. But yes, there is a lot of opportunity, I agree with that. But so are many other countries in the world. It's just the how people are going to be

able to deal with system and which also at the same time that it has opportunities it has many obstacles. There are a lot of obstacles but if you learn how to survive them, overcome them and in that process education is the key aspect and that's how come I truly encourage people to continue with that who was a key for me. My parents did well considering that they did not have the education. They have their house. They're selling that house and buying another one here in Newark. Umm... I have seen people over here in my practice with very little education who have little bodegas who do quite well. They do quite well financially, people with very small restaurants, small businesses you know installing this, doing that, preparing houses. There are people who buy kind of torn down houses and repair them and sell them and make profits. There are many opportunities if you look for them and if you work for them. At the same time there are also opportunities to destroy your life. There's opportunities for there's a lot of drug addiction in our community and that was one of the reasons why we had to come forth with CURA. There is a lot of opportunities for alcohol abuse which destroy things. There is a lot of opportunities for just doing your thing without realizing the consequences. Is as Durkheim wrote the Adomy I don't know if you studied that in your college days: people kind of get lost over here and people kind of feel sometimes lonely and a sense of not belonging and in doing that sometimes people get lost in the process and lose the opportunities that they could obtain. So there's opportunity for good and opportunities for bad and you have to be careful where you go.

LA: Do you think discrimination has any, any, any place in this kind of opportunities? Like, if someone would be coming here from P.R., do you think they would experience the same discriminations you did?

MVL: Not as much, but there still there is some. There is a good amount of that. I think that you probably will see some legislation introduced here and also encouraged strongly by the Reagan administration to what they call "English Only" or "English First". There is people who want us to be denied the right to speak in our languages. The right to bilingual education, many of the rights which derive from the language. That is a mass discrimination. People I guess a sort of paranoia you know if I don't understand what you're saying you must be talking about me kind of a thing. People don't realize that there are countries such as Canada, Belgium etc. and islands such as Aruba, which people speak four languages you know three or four languages. Over here they want to force upon the society to speak only English. Failing to recognize that in this world there are about 21 different countries that speak Spanish and basically about, as a main language, and about 4 or 5 that speak English as a main language.

LA: But if they would let the Spanish people speak Spanish, wouldn't it be kind of some discrimination against the other nationalities: the Hebrews...?

MVL: No, I have no objection to the Italians speaking Italian, the

Germans in German and etc. Well I just don't want to be prohibited in talking in Spanish if that is what I feel comfortable with and that is my language, my main language. I see a total obligation on our part coming over here, to learn English. We cannot expect the system to turn around to us and uh.. to learn just Spanish but to give us the opportunity to advance in our language up to such time we are able to command control of the English language which ultimately is the language that will open the avenues to us. On the other hand I have seen people over here who speak virtually no English become very successful merchants. I have clients who speak virtually no English and wonderful business that they run, they do quite well.

LA: When you first came did you think you would be where you are now?

Counselman MVL: I always had a goal to prosper myself, to be involved and to be able to help other people. People have asked me to become, to run for counselman or assemblymen. I haven't had the opportunity to do that yet but I always envision myself as being involved in the dynamics of the community and of getting ahead, wherever that may be and so in a way yes, and thank God you know up to that point been moving towards that goal.

LA: Do you think if you would have stayed in P.R. you would have been as well off as you are now?

MVL: Definitely not. That I'm convinced of.

LA: How about, how would you compare your life here now and your life over there if you would move back?

MVL: Well, at this point I really don't know if I could answer that but I know I could not practice law except in the federal court in P.R. I could not practice law in P.R. unless I pass the bar examination over there. The legal system is slightly different than over here, So I don't know if I could overcome the differences. I think that I would be able, knowing me I would work at it. But I don't know in the process I would be doing that I would want to do it. I have the other side of my family which is my wife, my kids, I don't know if they would want to go there just to live there. They are growing up over here, they are fully bilingual. They eat mangos and they eat Puerto Rican foods at home that's what we...(interruption)...

My wife also is a, she is a teacher and she works with me now in the office. And she has indicated already that she is not interested in returning to P.R. Puerto Rico there is a lot of, unfortunately at this point a lot of materialism has developed on P.R. a lot of the Um.. need to kind of a thing. I have a TV, when I get two the other guy wants three. And there is a lot of materialism which we are not particularly fond of. I have friends that have good income in P.R. have boats and what not, you get to talk to them and the conversation just turns to money, money, money, money all the time, and how much is this and how much is that. I invested this, I lost this. Not that much conversations as to relationships between children and parents.

LA: Do you think someone coming today can accomplish what you *[have]* accomplished?

MVL: Oh yeah, they can Um.. ~~the~~ the opportunities for education are still, there've been cutbacks due to the Reagan administration and uh.. but the opportunities are still there to go on to college, and to enter law school, because there are few, there so few that uh.. the colleges, the universities and the law schools and the other schools are still, I believe interested in having Puerto Rican if nothing, I'm just talking Puerto Ricans. Not that I have proof of that but you know the opportunities will be there.

LA: Do you think that the American society's attitudes have changed towards the Hispanics or Puerto Ricans coming to higher positions? What do you think their attitudes are towards us?

MVL: Well the, there has been a recognition by some groups that we're here to stay and that we're here to make an impact upon our own community and upon the rest of society. I think some of that is witnessed that now we have uh.. U.S. a federal magistrate, Jose Rodriguez uh.. people who've been elected as I said before at different levels in the state of N.J., in the city of N.Y., and other states across the country. So there's been a recognition that uh.. we are capable of doing the work, and if given the opportunity we will do the work. As a matter of fact at this point there is an organization of, a national organization of Hispanics elected of uh.. elected officials uh.. people who have been elected to different positions, and it has increased tremendously in the last few years. So there has been some recognition of that at some levels on the other hand, there are still the same obstacles that appear at colleges. I know of situations where Puerto Ricans have been denied promotions at Rutgers University and at different other institutions. At this point, as a matter of fact from what I understand the Puerto Rican Institute of Seton Hall University does not have a Puerto Rican director and things like that. You know there are different uh.. situations that continue to develop which we as a community have to keep an eye on uh.. to make sure that they uh.. do not occur.

LA: I see uh.. I remember from our last talk you said that the governor of P.R. went to visit you and the son of Jimmy Carter. How did you meet them?

MVL: Well uh.. I ran as a delegate for Ted Kennedy back in 1980 and in doing that I organized different activities uh.. to raise funds and to spread the word around our community. Uh.. they need to become involved in that election which I felt was a very crucial election to the Puerto Rican community. Uh.. in the process the governor. We, I, asked if the governor of P.R. could come and help us out. The ex.. at that point he was the ex-governor. He not in power at that point, uh.. if he could come to help us out and he conceded. You know he graciously ^{conceded} ~~exceeded~~ to that so uh.. we, I organized the tour which we touched upon almost 2,000 people in one day uh.. on a Sunday. Taking advantage of different organizations that had different activities and also we had organized our own uh activities at uh different businesses in the town in Newark. That's how the governor came to our house. Uh.. as to Jimmy Carter's son what happened was that we got

defeated in the convention and Jimmy Carter was nominated again only to be blasted out of the area. And the people from the Carter campaign requested that I help in that process. So, I organized an activity in my house for... Chip Carter was the one that came with all the uh.. secret service people and all that. They did a whole check on me and all that. And ~~I also in that~~ around that time I had organized another activity what is called the house of prayer over here in Newark, which at that time had a um.. priest, ~~the~~ Father Snotgrass eh.. Snotgrad who was a wonderful man, who was a very uh.. involved in the Puerto Rican community a uh.. beautiful person and we I organized an activity over there which ~~Himan~~ Herman Badillo came over here from New York uh.. John Kennedy's daughter Caroline came and Peter Shapiro who was in the uh.. County executive came. Uh.. after Shapiro I have many uh.. I guess basically regrets. He was a Democrat who was elected County Executive in Essex County basically ~~would again~~ around a one thousand so uh.. margin. And at that time a fellow named Miguel Rodriguez ran as a freeholder for him who received around 3,000 votes or so all of which of course went to uh.. Peter Shapiro. But once Peter Shapiro was in ~~the~~ power, ~~to~~ he basically forgot about the Puerto Ricans and apparently he also forgot about other people so. Uh.. in the last election although I did again support him and I was active in the campaign uh.. I was trying to see whether he would make any change in the final years but I believe then that the people took care of that and voted him out of power.

LA: Why did you do this "house of prayer" and this thing with Jimmy Carter when you invited them? What was the purpose of it?

MVL: Well to expose our community to meet these people in person and have them become interested in the process and come out and vote. I feel, and I still do feel, that if we don't participate in the electoral process, the electoral process will continue without us, will continue to run over us. If we do participate at least we have a say to some degree as to who gets nominated and who gets elected uh.. If we do not participate uh.. in the process then it becomes more difficult for us to request and demand things later on. Because they would always come back and you know "what do I have to lose if I don't give it to you?" But if we contribute financially and that's one aspect of the community that we have to develop is financial organization. Not me giving a hundred dollars or you giving a thousand dollars or somebody giving a thousand dollars, but that we organize that money so that it makes an impact upon a particular candidate. If it is somebody running for mayor that we as a community get together and say OK we're going to put in a thousand dollars to this campaign or we're going to put in ten thousand depending on the level of the campaign or more or less. Uh.. but that we organize that power so that we can then go in and say Ok uh.. we want this and this and this and that. You know we want certain positions uh.. whether it is ~~in~~ chairman of this or uh.. director of this uh.. whatever the position is for people in our community.

LA: Have you seen any kind of improvement in the essence that in the Puerto Rican community in the sense of uh.. politically, do you think that things have improved?

MVL: In Newark?

LA: Yes.

MVL: Not really. Uh.. we have at this point no Puerto Rican elected officials in Newark, although we comprise perhaps over 20 or 25% of the community in Newark. Uh.. We have one young man who is the vice mayor of Newark, a Puerto Rican young man uh. Quintana uh.. other than that uh.. there's really nothing else that we have.

LA: Do you think that we, the people, in well, do you think that we the people have more or less organized ourselves? Do you think that eventually we will start getting up there?

MVL: I certainly hope so Uh..

LA: In the near future?

MVL: In the near future Uh.. I think that the critical test is going to be the next election coming up for councilman.. If we do not put up any viable candidates and if we do not elect any candidates I think that as a community we're in a very difficult situation. In the North Newark area, I believe there is room for one Hispanic to be elected. Uh.. I think that at large, we also could have an opportunity to have somebody elected on the at large level, on the councilman level. Uh.. I think that as to the assembly races, in the near future we should be able to put up a Puerto Rican to run in this district that covers North Newark, Northward etc. of a of a in Newark. I do not believe that at this point we have the capacity to elect somebody to the mayor position or that level. However, I think that as a freeholder position we possibly could get somebody elected at the hopefully the first district which is also again the same you know area North Newark, East Newark area or if not at the at large level.

LA: Ok, In conclusion, because I know you are tired Uh.. Are you planning to stay in New Jersey?

MVL: Yes. God willing I am planning to stay here and..

LA: Die here?

MVL: I don't want to die (laughter) but uh.. whatever may be uh I would probably be here for a few years to come if God willing everything works fine.

LA: In general, how has life treated you? In your opinion.

MVL: Well, I have no regrets Uh.. I feel very happy with my wife, my children, my parents, my profession, my involvement in the community, my uh.. participation in different organizations uh.., participation with the press, TV, radio etc. I got, I feel happy, very happy.

LA: Have you reached the goals you have set for yourself?

MVL: Yes, I've reached the goals I set for myself but in life you cannot be content setting a goal, reaching it and staying there. Life is a neverending stairs...staircase. Uh.. I have other goals. I would like to be a judge someday and I might run for political office someday and plus that at this point my main goals are to make sure my children get a good education, and hopefully that they uh.. become professionals also in their own life. My daughter has a special interest in becoming an attorney, my son wants to be a nuerosurgeon. My little one has not indicated to me what she wants to do. She says she wants to be a client of mine one day. She would like to be working in my office. But uh.. my goal at this point is to help them you know uh.. become good people and I think that in that level they are profound. My 5 year old has a profound uh... thinking that many 20 year olds do not have. And for that I am very happy.

LA: So how do you see your future and your children's future?

MVL: Looking at it from today 1987 on November 23rd... Good.

LA: OK, Thank you.